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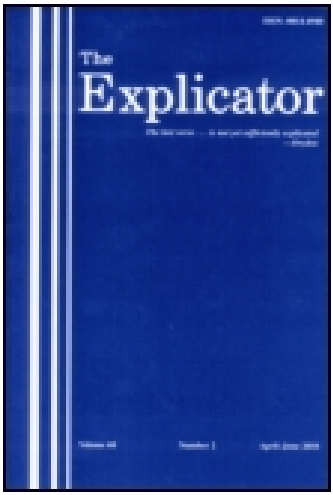

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Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood

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Perrault's LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

"Little Red Riding Hood" began as an oral folk tale and continued to be told to children for centuries before being published in a French version by Charles Perrault in 1697, and then in 1812 in the German version by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

> Over the years, scholars have piled an entire cosmos of meanings on this small girl's shoulders. Some call her tale a seasonal myth, an allegory of the sun swallowed by night, or the personification of Good triumphing over Evil. Her basket of wine and cakes, it's said, represents Christian Communion; her red cape stands for menstrual blood. Some see the tale in Freudian terms as the Ego overcome by the Id; others see it as symbolic of the relationship between Man and Woman. And inevitably the tale has been a vehicle for imparting sexual ethics in keeping with the social fabric of the times. Tellers have consciously and subconsciously manipulated the plot to portray a seduction by a temptress, the rape of a virgin or the passage of a young girl into womanhood.[1]

It is hard to believe that the anonymous creator of the tale would have had the slightest notion of what Freudians, Jungians, anthropologists, deconstructionists, and others have read into it. The story is worth examining because it reveals the genius of the original storyteller. It is noteworthy that Catherine Orenstein assumes that Perrault's version "must be a truncated, fragmentary version of the original oral tale."[2] The same applies to the version by the brothers Grimm because it was derived from Perrault.[3]

Much has been made of the fact that the little girl wears a red riding hood. This is undoubtedly because it seems odd that a peasant child whose wardrobe is probably limited to one faded dress should own such a luxury garment as a cloak intended to be worn for riding. Her mother would be lucky to own a cow, much less a horse. No father is mentioned. We suspect that this is an exceptionally poor family. It is highly unlikely that, as Perrault suggests, her mother would have made her daughter such a garment. The mother would have made something more practical if she had had the material to make anything at all. More probably in the original oral version, the little girl was given the red riding hood by some local Lady Bountiful whose daughter had outgrown it, and the little girl wears it all the time because she has never owned anything so beautiful before. When she wears the garment she probably fantasizes that she is rich and is riding her very own pony.

In analyzing a story, as in analyzing a dream, it is often the most incongruous element that can be the most revealing. The most incongruous element here is the fact that a little peasant girl who might not even own a pair of shoes, nevertheless, owns a scarlet hooded cloak, possibly lined with silk. If the red riding hood symbolizes anything, it suggests that the girl lives in a fantasy world, which explains why she does not hear her mother

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when she is told to go straight to her grandmother's house and not to talk to strangers.

The story is called "Little Red Riding Hood," and the little girl is called Little Red Riding Hood because she wears that famous garment all the time. It is extremely important to note that her name is certainly not Little Red Riding Hood. She is *called* Little Red Riding Hood by those who know her, and this name keeps appearing in the story from the title to the last scene in the story. We can assume that no one outside her immediate circle knows her unusual nickname. When she meets the wolf in the forest, it is natural for him to ask her name. In trying to start a conversation with a small child we still ask, "What's your name?" and "How old are you?" The wolf obviously could not know her or her nickname, although both Perrault and the brothers Grimm take it for granted that he does. The fact that she does not recognize the wolf as a wolf proves they have never met before. Furthermore, if they had met before, he probably would have eaten her on the spot, and there would have been no story, or at least a different story.

The little girl has been cautioned not to talk to strangers, but she has not really listened because she lives in a fantasy world in which she is a rich girl riding her own pony. She naïvely tells the wolf that she is *called* Little Red Riding Hood. With this information, the wolf hurries off to the grandmother's house while the little girl, who did not hear her mother's other piece of advice, "amused herself by gathering nuts, running after the butterfllies, and making nosegays of the wild flowers which she found."[4] This, of course, gives the wolf plenty of time to get to the grandmother's cottage where what transpired is well known.

An old woman who lives all alone in a forest inhabited by wolves is likely to be frightened and suspicious. When the wolf knocks at her door, her dialogue writes itself—which is another aspect of the genius of the original storyteller, quite probably a grandmother herself. The timid old lady asks, "Who's there?" Because the little girl has given the stranger a vital piece of information, the wolf easily gains entrance. He disguises his voice and says, "It is your granddaughter, Little Red Riding Hood." The nickname acts like a secret password, as the grandmother naturally assumes that no stranger would know it. The words "Little Red Riding Hood" take on an ominous tone which should send chills down the spines of children listening to the tale.

Thus, the little red riding hood and the nickname Little Red Riding Hood are a brilliant device to impress the hearer with the principal moral of the tale: *Do not talk to strangers because you never know what you might say that can be used against you.* Many grownups have learned to their regret that it is not only children who need to be reminded of this moral.

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Now, as then, 'tis simple truth—
Sweetest tongue has sharpest tooth![5]

—BILL DELANEY, *San Diego, California*
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NOTES

1. Catherine Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale* (New York: Basic, 2002) 4.
2. Orenstein 3.
3. Orenstein 3.
4. Charles Perrault, "Little Red Riding Hood," *Little Red Riding Hood: A Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) 5.
5. Perrault, "Little Red Riding Hood," Orenstein 19.

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